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The challenges of digitally-mediated Italian language and culture development: Engaging the online learner through gamification

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Abstract

This study explores the digital tools, activities, and rewards used in a blended Italian language and culture acquisition project. It discusses gamification in online teaching as an important strategy to engage learners, to increase their motivation, and to enhance their language acquisition. The results of the study could provide directions for future research in the field.

Keywords: *digital tools, gamification, Italian language and culture, motivation, online teaching*

1. Introduction¹

This study discusses gamification in online teaching as an effective strategy to engage learners, and to enhance language and culture acquisition. Muntean explains: “Gamification helps students gain motivation towards studying, and because of the positive feedback they get pushed forwards and become more interested and stimulated to learn. Gamification can constitute a powerful boost to determine them to study/read more” (2011, 328).

This paper explores digital tools, activities, and rewards used within the blended project “Let’s go digital! Contemporary Italy ‘surfs’ to Monash: discovering literature, culture and language”, between Monash University

¹ Giorgia Bassani wrote sections 1, 3, 3.2, 3.4, 4, 4.2, 4.2.1; Margherita Bezzi wrote sections 2, 3.1, 3.1.2, 4.1, 4.1.2, 4.1.3, 4.1.4; Luca Mă wrote sections 3.3, 5, 6.

(Melbourne, Australia) and the University of Urbino (Italy)². It illustrates the strategies used both to stimulate students' motivation and to make learners feel comfortable during both asynchronous and synchronous lessons.

The idea of this case study³ originated from the wish to create motivating classes of contemporary Italian language and culture and to enhance curiosity and fun in all the participants. Consequently, the research questions were: "how can the gamification be applied to this blended project?", "what are the best tools, activities, and strategies to use in this project?", and "how do learners and teachers could react to the gamification?". The next step was to analyse both students' and teachers' needs and the project goals to find the best tools and activities to implement. Then, the attention focused on participants' perception and, as Zaidah states, the purpose was "to go beyond the quantitative statistical results and understand the behavioural conditions through the actor's perspective" (2007, 1).

In the following paragraphs, the context of the above-mentioned project, the target, and the digital tools used are presented as well as the course-tailored gamified activities, strategies, and techniques implemented. Moreover, data obtained through online questionnaires are mentioned and discussed: the results analyse both the rationale underpinning their use in the technology-enhanced context and students' and teachers' feedback.

This paper also offers an overview of the limitations of the project and provides some directions for future research in the field.

2. Project context and target

The blended project consisted of two parts: the first course that took place at Monash University and the online course. The first course (in Melbourne, Australia) included the teaching of Italian literature, while the topics of the online part concerned contemporary Italian life and culture. The online lessons were taught and created by native Italian teachers on the basis of the Monash University syllabus. They chose authentic videos⁴ to provide an interesting and modern frame of Italian culture and society according to the features of the target and the goals of the syllabus.

Eight instructors worked collaboratively to create four lessons divided into two parts: an asynchronous one and a synchronous one. Students were asked to independently complete the asynchronous part (including a brainstorming

² This project was developed from March to May 2018. It was the second edition of the blended project between Monash University and the University of Urbino.

³ The idea of this case study was proposed by Margherita Bezzi.

⁴ All videos (movie clips, TV programs, interviews) were taken from YouTube: <<https://www.youtube.com>> (11/2018).

activity, a matching activity, and a comprehension activity), while during the synchronous one (including intercultural questions and a role play), learners were guided by their Italian teachers in Skype sessions.

All the students were between 18 and 22 years old and their level of language in Italian ranged from B1 to C1 (according to the European Framework). It is quite interesting to note that all of them had studied Italian before applying to Monash University: as they probably had found it stimulating and appealing, they chose to continue studying the language. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that all of them were employed or were actively searching for a job: thus, they were probably dynamic and willing to build their future from many angles.

Among the reasons they choose to study Italian at Monash University, they cited family origins, work and studies, language and culture. For this purpose, it is quite interesting to observe that all the students who had Italian origins, gave this as the main reason they chose to study Italian. They appear to want to both maintain their heritage and to communicate in Italian with their families (above all, with parents and grandparents). Those who chose Italian for their future careers wished to become teachers of Italian or take some professional advantages from the knowledge of this language. Some stated that they wished to enrol at universities in Italy.

As far as the language is concerned, all the learners wanted to practice Italian. In particular, some students stressed the pleasantness of Italian sound and rhythm, while others mentioned the importance of learning the language to understand its culture.

The hobbies and passions listed by the students were the usual interests of young people and included shopping, eating out, going out with friends, watching films and sports on TV, nature, animals, singing, participating in sports, staying in touch with their family, studying, and travelling.

While all the students had already travelled to Italy and saw it as a positive experience thanks to the culture, history, food, and the possibility to practice Italian, none of them had yet visited Urbino.

As for the expectations they had of the lessons, it is relevant to observe that some students mentioned the possibility of finding help with their studies. Many learners stated that they would have liked to become more confident when speaking Italian; one felt certain that the Skype lessons would be interesting and the Italian teachers competent. Expectations of instructors varied: some students wanted to find patient and competent instructors, while others focused upon the possibility to better understand Italian culture through interacting with an Italian teacher.

3. Digital tools and activities

In this section, digital tools and activities used within the blended project are discussed. First of all, the items of the asynchronous part of the lessons

are presented: the website to introduce students to Urbino, the Google Form (<<https://www.google.com/forms/about/>>) created for teachers' presentation, the mind map used to stimulate learners' hypotheses about the contents, and the matching activity taught to introduce new vocabulary. Then, the synchronous Skype lesson with its badges and rewards is analysed.

3.1 *Urbino website*⁵

As far as the theoretical framework is concerned, this evidence-based part of the study focused on pedagogic scenarios taken from an educational application within the blended project.

Since the first edition of the project, in 2017, the author of this paragraph was responsible for the design, digital content creation, and implementation of a Weebly-generated website (<<https://www.weebly.com>>) used to introduce Monash University students to the city of Urbino. The website shows the history, university, theatre, art exhibitions, music festivals, folklore, and food of Urbino. On this occasion, a quiz using Google Form was used to test the learners' exploration of the digital environment and, as suggested by Carloni⁶, to allow students familiarising with this tool, later employed in the lessons' asynchronous modality of the blended project (in Carloni, Zuccala 2017, 127).

After reflection by the author, and on the basis of the benefits of gamification in higher education, in 2018⁷ a gamified page was included within the website using the initial quiz, together with other course-tailored gamified activities, to build a gamified experience.

The choice of gamifying the digital learning activities in the website, which is the online learning environment, is due to the effectiveness of gamification that augments learners' motivation (Lister 2015). It promotes active learning by increasing students' engagement in learning (Burke 2012), and fosters students' autonomy (Fuchs, Hauck, Müller-Hartmann 2012). Another reason for this choice is related to the teachers' need to design motivating, creative, and unconventional language and cultural activities to increase students' curiosity and ease of learning.

In recent years, gamification "has gained a great deal of traction in higher education circles" (Handler Miller 2014, 214). A university student represents the model of "digitally aware learner" (Motteram, as cited in Carloni, Zuccala 2017, 124) who tests his/her skills on challenging digitally developed activities, and "who [is] better acquainted with the HE environment, and arguably more flexible in experimenting and assessing innovative approaches" (Carloni,

⁵ The Urbino website was created by Margherita Bezzi.

⁶ Giovanna Carloni, Professor at the University of Urbino, was the coordinator of the project.

⁷ For the second edition of the blended project.

Zuccala 2017, 124). On this basis, gamification is intended as “the application of gaming techniques to projects that are not games and not designed for entertainment” (Handler Miller 2014, 214), which is how it was implemented in this international project, to provide Monash University students of Italian with engaging digital language and cultural activities about Italian culture.

The main goal of this gamified proposal was to convey Italian language and culture in a new way, different from how students can habitually practice at their University. The purpose was to arouse learners’ active interest both in present day Urbino and the city’s pivotal role during the Renaissance, by providing a pleasant, dynamic, and enjoyable narration based both on a contemporary overview of the city as well as on past charismatic characters, and to give relevant facts about the history of this “ideal city”⁸. As “the gift of story is the opportunity to live lives beyond our own, to desire and struggle in a myriad of worlds and times, at all the various depths of our being” (McKee 2014, 142), narration gives students many possibilities to imagine, examine and become immersed in various spaces. It also develops a vivid, effective, and concrete interest in reality. This stimulates their curiosity to discover the city at the core of the story by fostering their cultural awareness and desire to visit it. Pluck and Johnson state that “curiosity may increase learning by motivating individuals to think more about the material being presented” (2011, 27). Another aim of the project was to induce Monash University students of Italian to enrol at Urbino faculties, in particular at Italian language and culture courses, by potentially stimulating the desire to stay in Urbino.

A positive learner’s flow (Csikszentmihályi 1990) and engagement was pursued through the narration, as well as by the website design, which conveyed the key messages of a cultural and pleasant place through informal communication, images (course-tailored and taken from the web), pastel colours and many digital activities to instil a sense of serenity and dynamism in the readers and possible future visitors.

On the final page of the website, where the gamified project was developed, every assignment was written in rhymes both to recreate the Renaissance atmosphere and stir learners’ curiosity regarding the “mission” in order to enhance students/players’ interest and their will to reach the final achievement by completing the digital activities and learning about Italian language and culture⁹.

⁸ “Ideal city” (in Italian “città ideale”) is the nickname of Urbino, originated from its pivotal role in the Renaissance period.

⁹ An example of assignment on the Urbino website was: “Caro studente, sei giunto alla fine della tua avventura sorprendente. Il Duca Federico ti aspetta con la sua corte per visitare insieme la città ideale dove un’accogliente atmosfera italiana potrai trovare. Clicca sullo stemma ducale per ricevere il tuo lasciapassare”.

In this framework, the “didactic mission” of the gamified project required students to solve digital cultural activities¹⁰ using skills such as memory and oral comprehension.

As it is important to show students/players their progress, to simulate the levels – one of the game’s main mechanics of gamification (Urh, Vukovic, Jereb, Pintar 2015, 392) – the tasks are divided into a numerical sequence of five levels set to drive students into a simulated immersive voyage in the Urbino Renaissance. At the end of the journey, the brave and skilled explorer receives a city pass, coherent to the historical framework and the philological recreation, which while celebrating the learner as ‘maximum student’, gives him/her access to visit Urbino¹¹.

*3.1.1 Gamified digital tools and activities of the Urbino website*¹²

Didactic needs play a pivotal role in teachers’ choices concerning the use of digital tools to create interactive activities, since as Mayo suggests: “where learning benefits appear, they are attributed to effective pedagogical practices embedded in the game design” (in Harasim 2012, 120).

To lead to meaningful engagement results, the game-design techniques implemented on the Urbino website were conceived as elements to create a project coherent in content, design, and narrative style. To achieve this purpose an organic narration was implemented using different tools and strategies (story, informal style, colours, clear layout, images).

To make students’ online experience rewarding, the user-friendly Weebly website seemed to be particularly suitable to design an informal learning environment that is pleasant to explore. On the final page of the website, digital tools – such as Blabberize (<<https://blabberize.com>>), Audacity (<<https://www.audacityteam.org>>), Wordwall (<<https://wordwall.net>>), and Google Form – were used to create many activities providing a variety of language and cultural items, with their focus and fil rouge on the pivotal role of Urbino in the Renaissance period, while at the same time presenting some aspects of the present day city.

Blabberize was used to record the rhymes of the historical and artistic personalities of Urbino such as Federico da Montefeltro, Battista Sforza, Raffaello, Piero della Francesca, and Bramante. It is a useful tool to make pictures talk: by uploading a .jpeg, .gif, or .png file (Blabberize: <<https://blabberize>

¹⁰ See section 3.1.2 for digital cultural activities.

¹¹ The text of the city pass was “Il Duca di Urbino Federico da Montefeltro ti proclama sommo studente per aver completato tutte le attività in maniera esauriente. Con questo lasciapassare la città ideale potrai visitare”.

¹² Margherita Bezzi chose all the gamified digital tools and created all the activities of the Urbino website.

com/faq>), it is possible to add to the picture a moving mouth, synchronized to an audio mp3 or wav. The audio files, whose limit is 30 seconds in the free version, can be recorded directly by the tool or by using a recorder, and then uploaded. To record the files for this project, cellular phones and laptops were used together with Audacity, a free, open source, “multi-track audio editor and recorder for Windows (<<https://www.microsoft.com/it-it/windows>>), Mac OS X (<<https://www.apple.com/it/mac/>>), GNU/Linux (<https://www.getgnulinux.org/it/switch_to_linux/try_or_install/>) and other operating systems (<<https://www.audacityteam.org/>>)”. Blabberize was used in the free version as the teaching planning [teaching-planning] had not been set for speaking-character videos available only under subscription.

The didactic choice to record the voices of the Dukes (Federico da Montefeltro and Battista Sforza) and of the artists of Urbino (Raffaello, Piero della Francesca, and Bramante) was to make the characters “live”, bringing them on scene by their own words and history: the rhymes tell of their lives, with particular attention given to their disposition and actions and, in order to be credible, are played by people of different genders and age, for instance, the author of this paragraph lent her voice to the Duchess of Urbino Battista Sforza.

Tools like Wordwall and Google Form were chosen for their possibility to provide students with an immediate feedback, which perfectly suits the gamification goal of showing results in current time (Kapp 2012, 35) and allows teachers to monitor the students’ progress.

Thanks to its attractive layout, recalling that of video games, Wordwall was used to create fun activities to be completed after the listening of the rhymes, such as: the quiz about the Duke of Urbino, the Battista Sforza’s anagram, the Raffaello’s crossword puzzle, the Piero della Francesca’s true or false questions, the Bramante’s maze multiple choice and the matching about local Italian food.

Wordwall, used to create interactive activities, is extremely compelling in the logic of applying game elements to non-game contexts, because this tool enables users to set up a countdown or a count forward as well as a leader board: game mechanics, that stimulate a positive sense of competition among the participants. According to Kapp, in fact, time is a “motivator for player activity and game play” (2012, 32) and leader board adds “a social component to gamification” (*ibidem*, 34). In the current project, the countdown timer was set and students were asked to enter their names before playing in order to visualize the final board. As Wordwall allows “us[ing] up to six activity types” (<<https://thedigitalteacher.com/reviews/wordwall>>) in the free version, for this project more than one account was used in order to freely implement all the activities.

Google Form was used to create a quiz about Urbino aimed both to verify students’ exploration of the whole website and to let them memorise some current features of the city.

Blabberize, Wordwall, and Google Form were embedded on the Weebly website in order to gather all the activities in just one online learning environment, which becomes a reference point for learners.

3.2 Instructors' presentation¹³

Before starting the synchronous Skype lessons, the Google Form tool was used in order to introduce the five Italian instructors of the project. The user-friendly tool facilitated students' work and decreased anxiety caused by technology. "Technical issues can cause frustration and a negative perception of the gamified environment by learners" (Lister 2015, 15). Moreover, for "the instructor of an online course, one of the biggest challenges is making sure that all participants have the necessary skill level with the communication tools that will be used during the course" (Conrad, Donaldson 2011, 38). The purpose was also to avoid unnecessary difficulties and to make instructors feel relaxed with a well-known digital tool.

The asynchronous modality chosen for this activity allowed teachers and learners to interact at their most productive time. "To be autonomous, learners need to be able to have some choice in what, where, when and how to study. At the same time, they should feel responsible for their own learning and for the learning of those with whom they interact" (Klimova, Semradova 2012, 91).

First of all, each instructor introduced him/herself through a short video¹⁴ posted on YouTube. Then, a Google Form was created: learners received four clues about their personal teachers and could watch all the linked videos. Several of the clues provided were clear and attributable only to one instructor, while other clues were common to several instructors. Considering students' skills, the level of this activity was easy enough: the aim was to make students feel confident of their skills in Italian language, and a transcultural dialogue in a relaxed atmosphere was the intention. Knowles explains that:

the psychological climate should be one which causes adults to feel accepted, respected, and supported; in which there exists a spirit of mutuality between teachers and students as joint inquirers; in which there is freedom of expression without fear of punishment or ridicule. People tend to feel more adult in an atmosphere that is friendly and informal. (1988, 47)

¹³ The instructors' presentation activity was created by Giorgia Bassani.

¹⁴ All the presentations followed the same guidelines. The topics of the videos were: name, origins, job, hobbies, interests, and second participation in the online project between Monash University and the University of Urbino.

Students had to read the clues, watch the videos, identify their teachers, and answer a multiple choice question¹⁵. In the Google Form tool, helpful images and colours were also integrated. Moreover, the language used (Italian) was friendly. Various objects and different home settings appeared in the videos, and the gamified activity finished with a rapid feedback that permitted learners to verify their answers and stimulated the autocorrecting process.

Students may [...] develop effective error detection skills, which lead to their own self-feedback aimed at reaching a goal. [...] In addition, students can seek better strategies to complete the task or be taught them, or they can obtain more information from which they can then solve problems or use their self-regulatory proficiencies. (Hattie, Timperley 2007, 86)

The general goals of this gamified activity were to establish a primary contact between teachers and students, to facilitate the acquaintance, and to provide video examples for learners' presentation¹⁶. In particular, the activity goals were to improve students' listening and oral comprehension skills, stimulate their intellectual curiosity, and establish a non-formal and pleasant atmosphere to facilitate learning and teaching processes.

Moreover, students had the opportunity to focus on the five videos, become acquainted with all the Italian teachers, and listen to different Italian intonations. According to the needs of the target and the aims of the blended project, this activity offered learners the opportunity to immerse themselves in authentic Italian language variations¹⁷. The "primary aim of the project was [...] to tackle this perceived lack of exposure by providing students with a further [...] opportunity for interaction with an appropriately trained native speaker of Italian" (Carloni, Zuccala 2017, 120).

Finally, this gamified activity encouraged learners to spend more time interacting with the inputs, and it originated a multisensory experience. Shams and Seitz state

Although sensory plasticity and perceptual learning in adults is considerably more restricted compared to development, accumulating reports indicate the superiority of bisensory training in adult learners. [...] unisensory memory retrieval was also enhanced by the multisensory learning conditions. Moreover, preconditioning with bimodal stimuli followed by unisensory conditioning led to crossmodal memory transfer. [...] multisensory training promotes more effective learning of the information than unisensory training. (2008, 2)

¹⁵ The question was: "*Chi è il tuo/la tua insegnante*" (Who is your teacher?). Answers were: "Giorgia Bassani, Margherita Bezzi, Luca Mă, Ilaria Pasquinelli, Ilaria Puliti".

¹⁶ Students sent their videos (posted on YouTube) by email to their Australian and Italian teachers after watching all instructors' presentations.

¹⁷ Italian teachers came from five different towns and two different regions.

3.3 Warming up with Mindmeister and Padlet

“The activities within a game can help define the game and narrow students’ focus to a specific type of learning” (Burke 2014, 31). How much effort do students have to make to complete the challenge and level up or better say move to the next activity? To facilitate students’ progresses, achievable activities were presented at first: a brainstorming mind map and a matching activity made through online tools such as Mindmeister (<<https://www.mindmeister.com>>)¹⁸ and Padlet (<<https://padlet.com/>>)¹⁹.

In Mindmeister, students interacted within an environment looking for items of value. They were asked to recall from memory their own knowledge about the topic, completing a route and answering some basic questions. The premise was that students would explore the environment to learn what to expect from the lesson and what to do next.

In Padlet, matching activities were presented within a wall-like space, and the learners were required to match one item to another: words, definitions, or pictures.

These activities were essential because they provided key words and key concepts that made sense later in the lesson. Therefore, these two warming activities could be seen, from a gamified perspective, as “items or piece of information [necessary] to continue the game” (Merrick 2016, 70).

As “gamification breaks larger goals into smaller practical challenges, encouraging players as they progress through levels, and engages emotionally to achieve their very best” (Burke 2014, 19), planning lessons with short and achievable “challenges” can be a compelling method to both motivate learners and help them to learn more accurately.

Instructors can create challenges to catch people’s attention, teachers can also mix things up: starting with quizzes or riddles is an excellent choice. These kind of challenges (a call to engage in a difficult but achievable task) are motivating and foster competence and learner confidence.

3.4 Synchronous Skype lessons

It is interesting to note that all the instructors had the possibility to use course-tailored badges and rewards²⁰ but they did not always implement this aspect of gamification in the Skype lessons. Rewards consisted of three different profiles associated with contemporary Italian songs. Badges and rewards were

¹⁸ For this tool, a subscription was used as the mind maps provided by the free version were not enough in relation to those required in this project.

¹⁹ This tool was used in the free version which, at the time of the project, allowed to create an unlimited number of walls.

²⁰ Badges and rewards were created by Giorgia Bassani.

chosen to feed students' extrinsic motivation; they were simple, in order to avoid the "over justification effect".

While badges might provide the type of formative feedback valued in alternative assessment, badges could also be a negative influence through decreasing a student's motivation to learn. [...] If learners interpret badges as external rewards, then they could possibly lower a student's motivation to learn or cause the student to focus on earning badges to the exclusion of the learning goals. (Abramovich, Schunn, Higashi 2013, 218)

Moreover, badges and profiles focused both on language play and humour that "can play a facilitating role in the following seven respects: Affective, Mnemonic, Linguistic, Cultural, Engaging, Social and Attentional" (Anthony 2013, 157). Humour can also be

a teaching tool to complete language instruction in oral synchronous environments. [...] Humor apparently contributes to making live online sessions less stressful, engages students into more spontaneous and lively uses of language, raises cultural awareness, and unites instructors and students as a community. (*Ibidem*, 171)

The purpose of Italian songs was to immerse learners in some aspects of contemporary society, enhancing their interest in Italian culture.

Not all teachers used these gamified strategies during the Skype lessons: reasons can be connected to the brief duration of online meetings (30'), to an ineffective communication among teachers before starting the Skype lessons, and to different ideas of gamification and humour.

4. Data and discussion

In the followings paragraphs data collected through online questionnaires are discussed. These data show learners' opinions about the asynchronous gamified activities of the Urbino website. In addition, teachers' and learners' feedback about the instructors' presentation activity are presented.

4.1 Urbino website: Research questions and students' perception

To evaluate the effectiveness both of the Urbino website and of its gamified tools and activities regarding their role to instil the desire to visit the city in the participants, three research questions were formulated to investigate learners' perception²¹. Students were asked to answer the following questions: 1) *Ti sei divertito/a a fare le attività?* (Did you enjoy doing the activities?); 2) *Ti è venuta voglia di visitare Urbino?* (Did the activities make you want to visit

²¹ The questionnaire about the Urbino website was created by Margherita Bezzi.

Urbino?); 3) *Quali attività ti sono piaciute di più. Puoi indicare più opzioni.* (Which activities did you like most? You can choose more than one option).

4.1.2 Participants

Fourteen students from the 2018 Italian studies cohort at Monash University took part in the gamified project.

4.1.3 Method

Data on students’ perceptions were collected by means of an online survey (implemented through Google Form) to be completed by each student at the end of the gamified project, presented on the Urbino Weebly website. The questionnaire focused on the learner’s perception of gamification in an online learning environment through interactive didactic activities about present day Urbino and during the Renaissance. It consisted of three questions on: enjoyment in doing activities (Question 1), desire to visit Urbino after doing the activities (Question 2), and preferred activities (Question 3).

4.1.4 Analysis and discussion

The data gathered through online questionnaires seem extremely positive in relation to students’ perception of the gamified project, with 100% of the participants expressing their desire to visit Urbino (Question 2). Over 57% of the students either expressed “very much” or “much” in answer to “Did you enjoy doing the activities?” (Question 1), while only one student responded that he had not had fun while doing the gamified activities.

Question n. 1	very much %	much %	quite %	no %
<i>Ti sei divertito/a a fare le attività?</i> Did you enjoy doing the activities?	14,3	42,9	37,5	7,1

Table 1 – Enjoyment in doing activities

When asked to “express their preferences about activities” (Question 3), students chose those that had engaged them both in linguistic games and in game’s mechanics, dynamics, and interfaces. The table below reports students’ preferences of all the activities provided in the gamified path.

Activity’s name	Preferences (in n. of students)
Quiz about the Duke of Urbino	3
Battista Sforza’s anagram	5

Raffaello's crossword puzzle	4
Piero della Francesca's true or false	5
Bramante's multiple choice	5
Matching local Italian food	7
Quiz about Urbino	6

Table 2 – Preferred activities on Urbino website

These data show that the gamified project implemented on the Urbino website was effective to create compelling, fun, and motivating activities about Italian language and culture. Moreover, it instilled in the students the desire to visit and stay in Urbino.

4.2 Instructors' presentation activity: students' perception

Conrad and Donaldson remind us that reflective activities are fundamental because

reflection can provide insight for instructors on their teaching and for students on their learning. Reflective feedback allows instructor to evaluate the effectiveness of the students' experiences in the course. This information can be used to continually modify the course to better meet not only the stated learning to gain insight into their individual activity outcomes and apply that knowledge to their learning experience. (2011, 81)

Therefore, after the instructors' presentation activity, learners were asked to reflect on the gamification. The purpose was to register students' perception. Two questions were proposed to investigate learners' liking level and the reasons of their answers²². The first question was: "*Ti è piaciuta l'attività?*" (Did you like the activity?) and the possible answers were: "*Sì, Così così, No*" (Yes, So so, No). The second item was: "*Perché? Motiva la tua risposta*" (Why? Explain your answer). Results show that all the students liked the gamified activity and they considered it motivating for different reasons. Feedback were grouped in the following table:

	Answers to question 2 (<i>Perché? Motiva la tua risposta</i> - Why? Explain your answer)	N. of students
1.	Nice/amusing/informative/interesting/different modality to see/know teachers before synchronous Skype lessons	15

²²The questionnaire for students about the instructors' presentation activity was created by Giorgia Bassani.

2.	Opportunity to practice/listen/speak Italian	6
3.	New way to study Italian	1
4.	Examples for student's video presentation	1
5.	Opportunity to learn Italian culture	1
6.	Simple way to know teachers	1
7.	Personal and accessible feel to the activity	1

Table 3 – Students' opinion about the instructors' presentation activity

These data show that students' feedback coincides with the goals of the gamified activity (establishing a first contact, facilitating the acquaintance, providing video examples, improving students' listening and oral comprehension skills, increasing their intellectual curiosity, and creating a non-formal and pleasant atmosphere): learners understood the role of the activity and appreciated it. It is interesting to note that the second question was an open-ended one. This means the answers were not guided and feedback was the result of the learners' experience. When asked to share their opinions, students focused mainly on gamified (15) and linguistic (6) aspects, while two students responded emotively ("It added a more personal and accessible feel to the activity", "It's a new way to learn Italian. However, I'm very excited"). One student saw this as an opportunity to discover some elements of Italian culture, while others thought the gamified modality was new (1) and simple (1). With regards to these data, it can be stated that the learners enjoyed the gamified activity and were eager to meet their personal teachers, as well as to start the synchronous Skype lessons.

The major challenge in constructing an introductory post is to disclose just enough personal information without making it egocentric. Although a list of personal achievements and awards would probably make the writer look professional and knowledgeable, it might also create an unnecessary gap between the instructor and the students. (Samburskiy 2013, 41)

In the above mentioned case, both video contents (topics, non-formal language, objects, home setting) and the gamified modality probably prohibited any possibility of teachers' egocentrism. Consequently, it can be supposed that the activity reduced the distance among participants in an interactive way. Garland suggests the use of "gamification in ways that encourages students to spend more time focusing on and interacting with the material, rather than having them only complete work and produce results" (2015, 55).

Finally, it can be postulated that the gamified activity engaged learners, established a friendly atmosphere, and originated positive emotions that, according to Fredrickson, "broaden the scopes of attention, cognition, and

action and that they build physical, intellectual, and social resources” (2001, 222). Moreover, “Not only do positive emotions make people feel good in the present, but also, through their effects on broadened thinking, positive emotions increase the likelihood that people will feel good in the future” (*ibidem*, 226). Therefore, the gamified activity worked as an ice-breaker for the following synchronous Skype lessons and probably facilitated all the learning process, diminishing negative emotions.

4.2.1 Instructors' presentation activity: teachers' perception

All the instructors completed an anonymous questionnaire where they gave their opinions about this gamified activity²³. Data obtained show it was considered an effective activity (4/4) that facilitated making the acquaintance (4/4), established a first contact with learners (1/4), and provided examples for students' video presentations (2/4). Moreover, some teachers thought the gamified activity stimulated learners' curiosity (3/4), created a pleasant atmosphere (1/4), favoured the development of students' oral comprehension skills (1/4), and was useful to verify learners' linguistic level (1/4). Besides this, three teachers proposed the same activity for a new blended project. In the open-ended question, one instructor stated the importance of stimulating students' curiosity through tasks and two teachers focused on the positive role of the rapid feedback to increase motivation and engage learners.

These data show a level of correspondence to both students' feedback and the goals of the gamified activity.

5. Limitations of the case study

It is important to remember that “case studies have various advantages, in that they present data of real-life situations and they provide better insights into the detailed behaviours of the subjects of interest” (Zaidah 2007, 5). Therefore, despite the relevant limitation of the present study, i.e. the limited number of students and results, which prohibited the generalisation of the conclusions to other contexts, this data offered teachers the opportunity to better understand the gamified project and to design future activities.

Another limitation of the study concerns the students' feedback: due to the nature of the project, students had to express their opinion through mandatory online questionnaires that contained their personal email address. Given their youth, it is possible that the students were concerned about expressing any uncensored opinions.

²³ The questionnaire for teachers about the instructors' presentation activity was created by Giorgia Bassani.

6. Conclusion and future research

A primary conclusion is that it will be useful to gather students' perception in different phases of the project (before, during, and after). To this purpose, in future projects, the use of different tools (interviews, anonymous questionnaires, and check lists) to collect information of a different nature may yield interesting results. Furthermore, it could be also useful to enrich the research tools with more items to investigate more fully the students' perception and expectations.

On the basis of the data presented and forthcoming research, other gamified digital activities could be designed and implemented in future online projects, and activities already used could be remodelled. For example, for the instructors' presentation activity some elements could be modified: number and duration of videos, topics and typology of teachers' presentations. According to learners' needs and the goals of the project, new and old gamified strategies could be implemented in order to enhance students' motivation as well as to foster their curiosity to discover Italy and study in Urbino.

Together with new activities and tools, future work should be extended to a more effective system of giving instant feedback and rewards to increase the consistency of the study. Van de Boer recommends introducing rewards because when "someone gets a reward, the brain creates a substance called dopamine. This substance causes a feeling of pleasure, happiness and well-being" (2013, 15). Therefore, it may be necessary to create a better system in order to estimate and reward students' performance, as well as to give them clear information about their knowledge, skills, and progresses.

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